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IS CORPORAL PUNISHMENT DEGRADING?

BY THE VERY REV. THE DEAN OF ST. PAUL'S, LONDON.

IS THERE anything degrading in corporal punishment? There is said to be a feeling that such is the case in America, and there are painful signs of the growth of such an opinion in England. On what does it rest?—on a principle for which authority can be claimed? or upon the results of experience? If it rests upon a principle, that principle must have found expression in some book whose claim to attention and obedience is generally admitted, or else must rest upon that universal sense of the fitting and the right, which is thus eloquently described by Hooker: * “The general and perpetual voice of man is as the sentence of God himself. For what all men have at all times learned, Nature herself must needs have taught, and, God being the author of Nature, her voice is but his instrument. By her from him we receive whatsoever in such wise we learn.” Before appealing to our own experience, or the well-authenticated experience of others, it will be well to examine what these two great authorities have to say on the subject.

There is no book which is so universally accepted as an authority on all moral questions as the Bible; and the question of punishment, and the best kind of punishment, is essentially a moral question. I take for granted that all sensible persons, Christian or otherwise, will admit that there are in every child born into the world tendencies to evil that need rooting out, and inclinations towards good that need planting or nurturing. I will therefore first examine what this authority, which Christian people will recognize to be such, has to say on the subject, and then I will turn to that general voice of mankind to which those

* “Ecclesiastical Polity,” I., VIII., 3.

who are not Christian may be more disposed to attach importance. What, then, has the Bible to say ?

It is thus that Solomon, in the Book of Proverbs, lays down a general principle on the subject :* “He that spareth his rod hateth his son : but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes.” And then in another portion of the same book he gives the reason for this advice : † “Foolishness is bound in the heart of a child ; but the rod of correction shall drive it far from him.” And then, extending his view to the effect of such punishment on a child’s future, he says : ‡ “Withhold not correction from the child : for if thou beatest him with the rod, he shall not die. Thou shalt beat him with the rod, and shalt deliver his soul from hell.” And : § “The rod and reproof give wisdom : but a child left to himself bringeth his mother to shame.” But whilst Solomon gives such unmeasured praise to the use of the rod in the case of children, we have a caution against its excessive use in the punishment of adults, in an earlier book of Holy Scripture.

There is this instruction given by the judges of Israel in the book of Deuteronomy, || that, in the event of a controversy arising between men, “if the wicked man be worthy to be beaten, the judge shall cause him to lie down, and be beaten before his face, according to his fault, by a certain number. Forty stripes he may give him, and not exceed : lest, if he should exceed, and beat him above these with many stripes, then thy brother should seem vile unto thee.” It is possible that the idea of corporal punishment being degrading may have been drawn from this warning against its abuse. But it is well to note that such punishment is ordered, and therefore must have been approved by the writer ; it is only its excessive application that is forbidden. If we turn to the New Testament, we find St. Paul speaking of his own endurance of corporal punishment along with other forms of suffering and trial, without suggesting the idea of an essential difference between them : ¶ “In labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequent, in deaths oft. Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned,” and so on. And then he seems to regard all such sufferings with a sense of satisfaction, as having endured them all for his Master’s sake : ** “If I must

* XIII., 24. † XXII., 15. ‡ XXIII., 13, 14. § XXIX., 15. || XXV., 2, 3.

¶ II. Cor., XI., 23-25. ** Ibid., v. 30.

needs glory, I will glory of the things which concern mine infirmities." And of one greater than St. Paul we are told that he was scourged, and that * "with his stripes we are healed." Whilst I cannot neglect to remind those who are inclined to forget it that in the epistle to the Hebrews † we read: "Whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth"; and: "What son is he whom the father chasteneth not?"

I turn from the book of authority to that general voice of mankind which speaks with authority. Greece and Rome are the two nations of antiquity to which appeal is ever made for guidance, as from them we learn what the more cultured nations then thought and did. Corporal punishment certainly existed in the schools of Greece, and we do not find any objections raised to it by Greek writers on the score of its being degrading, though Plutarch thinks it might well be dispensed with. In Rome the family bond was stronger than in Greece, and the power of inflicting corporal punishment that was left in the hands of *paterfamilias* was absolute in earlier times, but it was subsequently limited by law. Quintilian finds grievous fault with teachers who are unsparing in the using of the rod to cover their own negligence, and severely censures the abuse of corporal punishment. But he wrote in days when the glories of Rome were departing; and it is worthy of remark that no children treated their parents with greater tenderness and reverence than did those of Rome in the days when the father possessed an unlimited power of punishment. It would be profitless to trace out the use of corporal punishment in the less civilized nations; but the challenge may be boldly given to those who object to such punishment to point out the nation where it was not to be found and where a higher state of morals or more affectionate family relations could be found than in the two great nations just named. The words of Hooker which I quoted at starting were not intended to apply to a universal consensus concerning corporal punishment, but it seems to me that they are as applicable to that as to other matters, and that when we find civilized and uncivilized nations equally adopting the same method for eradicating vices and curing faults in children, we may conclude that it is what Nature suggests as the most effective instrument for the purpose.

* Isaiah, LIII. 5.

† XII., 6, 7.

But we must take care not to assume that such consensus carries us further than it really does. All that I claim for it is that corporal punishment properly administered is not degrading. When applied in excess, I thoroughly accept what is said in Deuteronomy; it may then make our "brother seem vile unto us." Moreover, there can be no doubt that what Quintilian censured in his day is a fault that has existed in most periods of the world's history. The thoughtless, the hasty, the ill-tempered parent or teacher is tempted to make corporal punishment his sole instrument for correcting small faults and grievous moral offences, without taking into account differences of temper or disposition, or taking the trouble to estimate the effect which such chastisement will have upon those subjected to it. In defending corporal punishment I must be understood as defending its use, not its abuse; as approving it when employed after reflection by a judicious parent or instructor, not as practised under the influence of passion or excitement by an angry guardian or teacher.

In examining what light experience can throw on the subject, it may be well to see what influence the two extremes in the method of bringing up children have on their after life and upon their feelings towards the guardians or teachers by whom they have been educated. The two extremes to which I refer are kindness and severity; of course the wisest educator is he who adopts the golden mean, and is so kind as not to destroy a wholesome fear in the child, and so severe as never to diminish its affection. But few people have sufficient wisdom to walk consistently in the golden mean, and consequently in various degrees we find parents and teachers tending systematically towards one or the other extreme. The question is, Which extreme does experience show to be the less dangerous? I fear that I must unhesitatingly give the palm to severity. I wish it were not so. I wish I could believe that the contrary was the case; but I must speak as I have found it.

I remember a dear good friend, one of the most distinguished and excellent men of his day, who could never bring himself to punish his sons, but thought he had sufficiently done his duty when he had remonstrated with them after the commission of any grave fault, whilst lighter offences were passed over without rebuke. Like Eli of old, he would say, "Nay, my sons, for it is no good report that I hear," and there the matter ended. When those sons grew up, nothing was more painful than to witness the indif-

ference, not to say neglect, with which they treated their illustrious father. It seemed as though they were conscious that faults had been nurtured in them by his excessive tenderness that ought to have been uprooted by severer measures, and that they laid all the blame for this at their father's door, and withheld from him that reverence which they ought to have felt, because he had neglected to uphold his own authority over them and had failed to demand that respect and obedience which it was their duty to render. I do not say that they did feel this, but it seemed to an outsider as though such must be the case. On the other hand, I knew a woman whose widowed mother had brought her up in a manner that seemed to me most harsh and unjust. They were in very poor circumstances, and at times the girl was sent out to gather sticks to light the fire: if the child brought too large a stick, the mother would beat her for having stolen it out of a hedge, without examining into the truth of what she asserted. I give this as a sample of the home discipline. Of all the affectionate children I ever knew that daughter was one of the most remarkable. Her wages were freely given to her mother; there was nothing that she would not do to help her: I believe she would willingly have laid down her life for her. It is only right to say that both mother and daughter were excellent Christian women.

I mention these two cases as extremes, as having excited my wonder and surprise at the time; not as recommending either for imitation. But I must also add that in families where the tendency has been in a less degree to one or the other of these extremes, I have found there have been more reverence and affection, more willingness to make sacrifices for parents, more pleasure in contributing to their pleasure and happiness in after life, where the tendency has been to a severe method of treatment than in cases where the tendency has been towards excessive tenderness and kindness. The ancient Romans to whom I have already referred were examples of the effect of the former method of treatment. I fear it would not be difficult to discover examples of the influence of the latter mode almost anywhere in England or America at the present day.

To turn from the effect of severity in the home to its influence at school, where its abuse has been most marked. The old bad system is thus graphically described by an eminent Scotch judge, who was one of the founders of *The Edinburgh Review*. In an

unpublished letter written nearly half a century since, he says : " I am not squeamish about corporal punishment for schoolboys. It is unquestionably necessary. But the misfortune is that the master, like a colonel, who resorts to it habitually, naturally neglects and despises all other and better arts of controlling. And it produces a far deeper feeling of mortification and disgust in boys than the habitual user of the leather* is apt to imagine. Sixty years have not even abated my hateful recollections of the high school on this sole account ; and I have known many of our good pupils who, after becoming successful men, have implored me to save our academy boys from what they uselessly suffered." With the opinions here expressed I cordially agree, but I cannot refrain from mentioning what fell under my own experience. In a national school over which I had control there was a clever lad who rendered himself peculiarly obnoxious to the master by being (what is called in school slang) " cheeky." He was consequently flogged frequently and severely. I did more than remonstrate. I forbade such treatment. Years afterwards, when this lad had risen to a position of considerable dignity in the church, I spoke to him sympathetically of his schooldays and the floggings he had received. " Oh," he said at once, " I was not flogged once too often ; it did me good." It was evident, therefore, that he did not feel degraded by what he had suffered.

The great Duke of Wellington is reported to have said that he was indebted to the play-fields at Eton for the material which enabled him to conquer Napoleon—in other words, that the physical energy and the moral force of the officers to whom he was largely indebted for his victories were gained in that excellent school. Now, it is certain that corporal punishment was freely employed at Eton. Many, probably most, if not all, of the Duke's officers must have been educated under Dr. Keate, who was notorious for the free use he made of the birch ; and it is notorious that these high-spirited, noble men, whose souls would abhor the contact of anything they felt to be degrading, so far from being ashamed of having suffered corporal punishment, made a joke of it and freely talked of it in after life. In reminiscences of Eton by the Rev. C. Allix Wilkinson (an old Eton boy who had seen much of the use of the birch), there are these state-

* In Scotland a leather strap called "the taws" is used for corporal punishment, not a cane or birch rod.

ments, which confirm what has been just said: "Keate was a great scholar, an elegant poet, a capital teacher, and we must not hold lightly the man who has flogged half the ministers, secretaries, bishops, generals, and dukes of the present century." And then he thus sums up what he has to say on the subject: "Flogging then, on the whole, as we had it at Eton, by the head master alone, in whose mind there could be no element of spite and consequent severity, and with a few twigs of birch applied, as it still is, where it is not pleasant but can do no real harm to any one, I do not hesitate to say I stand up for, let tender mammas and squeamish parents say what they will; and I am quite sure, from intercourse with my grandchildren and other boys, that they had rather the system should be continued, not, as in our time, flogging for everything, but still flogging with certain restrictions; they like short, sharp, and all over, better than extra absences, long lessons to learn by heart, or one thousand seven hundred lines to write out." (P. 46.)

I had an amusing proof of this punishment not being thought degrading some years since. I was visiting a late head master of Eton, when he said: "Last week I had a party of my old pupils, officers in the army; after dinner one of them playfully lifted his hand as though using a birch rod. I said, 'Oh no; surely, I never switched you'; to which an immediate response was given, 'Oh yes, you did'; and then all the others joined in chorus, 'And me, too'; upon which they all laughed, and seemed heartily amused," clearly showing that they felt no indignity had been put upon them by what had been done, and that they were all the better friends with the master who had inflicted the punishment. It may also be worth mentioning that it was and probably is still considered at Eton a great mark of moral courage for the boy to cut a chip off the block over which he is hoisted to be switched, whilst he is under punishment, and when he succeeds in doing it he wears the chip attached to his watch chain for the rest of his life as an honorable distinction. Archdeacon Denison, an old Eton boy, is a strong advocate of corporal punishment, and thinks that it does much towards forming a manly and disciplined character. It is thus he speaks of it in his "Notes of My Life" (p. 10): "I suffered at Keate's hands three times: twice for playing tricks in my dame's house, once for bathing at a forbidden hour, or rather, I ought to say and with shame to say it,

for fibbing to Keate when he caught us just as we returned. We ran and hid, but were ferreted out. Approaching Keate, with my hat off, and my wet towel hanging out of it, I stated to him that it was a mistake to suppose I had been bathing. He looked at me and said nothing, but next morning, as I richly deserved, I suffered heavily."

So far I have been dealing with one side of the question. I have been endeavoring to show that the opinion that corporal punishment is degrading has no solid foundation on which to rest, but that it is merely a piece of nineteenth-century sentimentalism, born of the notion that the greatest evil in the world is bodily pain. There is another side from which to view it, and to that I turn.

I suppose there are few, if any, rational people who will not admit that, human nature being what it is, we must have some kind of punishment both for youths and adults, and that, for punishment to be of any value, it must be something that the person on whom it is to be inflicted will dislike and seek to avoid. In England we have abolished flogging in the army, and experienced military men say that the effect of this will be that in time of war certain offences, which have hitherto been punished by flogging, will be punished by death, as it is impossible to preserve discipline and protect the army from serious peril without severely visiting breaches of discipline and duty, and no other punishment is possible in the field. So with respect to children: if we are to train them up to habits of reverence and respect for guardians and instructors; if we are to instil into them habits of industry and application to studies to which they are disinclined, there must be in reserve some power of compulsion which they will be afraid to invoke, and that power must be punishment. The boy who will say to his father, when threatening to box his ears for being disobedient or impertinent, "If you do, I will summon you before a magistrate," will soon set all parental authority at defiance, if his threat is allowed to prevail, and the natural consequence will be an undisciplined life, estrangement between father and son, probably a vicious youth and a miserable old age. For the sake of the child, of the family, of society, of the country, there must be some deterrent punishment, both at home and at school. The question is, What shall it be? Whatever it is, to make it effective it must be well and wisely administered, with a

single desire to amend the child, and not under the excitement of anger or irritated feeling. Moreover, it must be proportioned to the offence, and not an indiscriminate application of the same treatment, whether the wrongdoing be great or small,—a casual neglect or thoughtless disobedience that has to be amended, or a serious moral delinquency that has to be cured.

For purposes of discipline there ought, therefore, to be drawn a sharp line between grave offences which denote serious moral obliquity, such as dishonesty, drunkenness, treachery, and such like, in an aggravated form, and offences which spring from a less vicious source. For the less serious kind of wrongdoing, what can be better than suitable corporal punishment? It is sharp and short; it is sufficiently unpleasant to make it disliked; whilst it has the advantage of teaching a boy to bear bodily pain without screaming, as every boy with noble instincts would despise himself for yelling over a little pain in the presence of his companions. It is what brave, high-spirited boys greatly prefer to any other kind of punishment, as it does not interfere with their ordinary sports. I well remember a manly, high-toned boy grumbling to me one day because at his school the master had substituted a task for some strokes over the hand for trifling offences; as he well said, "It interferes with our games, spoils our chance of any enjoyment of our leisure time, and makes us do work in which there is no good." On the other hand, a tame-spirited lad who took no part in games, and only loafed about during holiday time, would find little to annoy him in the work he would have to do, as it would be an excuse for not sharing in games in which he ought to take part, and would nurture the idea that bodily pain was the greatest of evils.

With the increasing luxury of the present day there is special need for what will help to strengthen the moral fibre of the boy, and, by encouraging fortitude under the infliction of bodily pain, nurture true manliness and courage, without which no man can play well his part in life. Moreover, it is well to look at the possible alternatives for corporal punishment. The ordinary one is writing out a number of lines from some Greek, Latin, or English author, perhaps writing some lines over twenty or thirty or more times; and then there is a cunning device of tying several pens together, so as to make one action of the hand multiply itself; or if the boy has money he pays some one to

do the task for him ; or perhaps, instead of an imposition, the boy has to learn a certain number of lines. All such punishments make manly boys who are apt to be disinclined to learning, hate it still more ; and if they impel them to avoid the faults which they are intended to cure, it is at the expense of implanting other faults of a different character.

With respect to other transgressions of a more serious character, or vices, as I should prefer to call them, some more serious punishment is needed. They degrade the boy ; they lower his moral status ; if not checked and uprooted, they will lower his character for life. They need some sterner and severer punishment ; something that is felt to be degrading ; something from which whatever of true nobility there is in the boy will revolt. I object to corporal punishment being employed as the remedy for such offences. I think it degrades such punishment, and makes it less applicable for purposes where it would be useful. And if it be said that in such cases it might be much more severe, then I object to it because it savors of cruelty, and so might harden the youth on whom it is inflicted. I should greatly prefer expulsion from the school or college, with every circumstance that could tend to make such a punishment felt to be degrading. It would then be a crisis in the boy's life ; the sentence would be dreaded as something injurious to, if not destructive of, his future career, and if there was any good in him it would be aroused to make a serious effort to regain the position he had lost, whilst if there was no good in him a stigma would be fixed on him which would preserve others from being injured by him.

In England there is an excellent regulation for admission into the position of an officer in the army. "A certificate of good moral character must be produced, signed by the tutors or heads of the schools or colleges at which he has received his education for the four years immediately preceding the date of application ; or some other satisfactory proof of good moral character." And I believe there is the same requirement for the navy. Expulsion from school or college for a grave moral offence therefore disqualifies a boy from serving the Queen in either of these distinguished professions. Such a punishment is degrading, and is felt to be such. But it is the offence which degrades ; not the mere imposition of the punishment which proclaims the fact of the degradation to others. And as our lower nature is apt to

think more of the loss of dignity or position in the eyes of others than it does of the wrongdoing for which the punishment is inflicted, it becomes effective in bringing home to the mind of the transgressor the abhorrence in which society holds the vice or the crime of which he has been guilty.

I have mentioned one way in which in England a punishment that is meant to be degrading is inflicted ; but every nation must have its own method of providing such a protection for the well-being of its people, and it is necessary that such punishments should be adapted to the differing habits and feelings of the various classes and grades of society of whom a nation is made up. For it is obvious that what would be felt as degrading by a highly-educated and cultivated man would have no such effect upon an uncultured, coarse, or rough-natured person.

Looking upon punishment, therefore, as designed to correct faults, to preserve the authority of superiors, to eradicate tendencies to vice, and to assist in implanting habits of industry and virtue in children otherwise inclined, I believe that no form of it is better adapted to its purpose than that which Solomon recommends and all nations have adopted. I only regret that its abuse has given too much ground for protests against its use, and I gladly raise my voice in favor of its wise and judicious application.

ROBERT GREGORY.